Betty Crook

HE LIVED A STORY-BOOK LIFE

Another link with the early days of the west was broken last week with the passing of "Happy Jack" Jackson, the famed old rancher of the Steveville district, who died as he had lived, alone in the log ranch house on the bank of the Red Deer River.

Only a few people in the area recall the coming of H. G. Jackson to the then unlimited range land of Western Canada, but there are still a number who rode the range with the tall cowman in the later years of the big herds. They tell some great stories of his dry humor and pointed observations.

He was a character who lived a real story-book life even to following the well worn plot of "honest, hard-working, foreman falls heir to the biggest ranch in the cattle country". For that is just what Happy Jack did.

When he came to Canada from Mexico in 1902 with a shipment of Longhorns he renewed acquaintance with D. J. Beresford who had just arrived to make plans to transfer his huge herds from his holding in Mexico to a new range north of the Red Deer River. Happy Jack became cattle foreman for Beresford, and on the death of that English rancher, became the owner of the place he had helped to build up.

Born near Atlanta, Georgia, in 1861, Happy Jack was old enough to remember that Sherman's men, during their march to the sea in the Civil War took everything worth while from his father's little plantation. "All they left was one flea-bitten old mule," he used to tell the

boys around the camp fire. "And next spring my father and brothers had to pitch in with shovels to get the potatoes and corn planted," he would continue in the drawl which remained with him to the last.

The family joined the covered wagon trek to "Arkansaw," and eventually further west into the cattle country of New Mexico.

"I never met up with Billy the Kid," he used tosay, but I knew some of his cronies and his stamping ground real well."

The old cowboy had a well worn 45 Colt revolver which had seen him through exciting times in Arizona, Kansas, Oklahoma, Western Texas, the Panhandle country and Old Mexico. It had no notches on its handle, but Happy Jack said it had killed a man -- when a friend used its butt to silence a trouble maker. It used to rest beneath his pillow every night, and when he could no longer mount a horse with ease, it used to travel along with him under the cushion on the seat of the democrat.

Before Alberta became a province, the Beresford ranch was well established on three townships north of Jenner and Iddesleigh, and Happy Jack was known throughout the countryside as an honest and conscientious foreman. He ran the big ranch on his own for months at a time while the wealthy playboy owner was off on his frequent trips.

It was in 1906 when J. D. Beresford was killed in a train wreck in North Dakota, and Happy Jack found himself the owner of "Mexico" ranch. A grateful boss had bequeathed it to him.

The cowman liked to recall the fluster caused by the former owner's older brother. He was Lord Charles Beresford, First Lord of the

Admiralty, who made a hurried trip from England to the Alberta ranch to settle his brother's affairs. "He had no sooner got here than the telegrams and cables came a pilin' in. You'd think the British Empire would fall apart and disen-tee-grate if he didn't get back there pronto," he would chuckle.

There were plenty of arguments in the ranch house, for Happy Jack dearly loved a heated session, and would take an opposite view just to make the sitting interesting. One time his guest was an Englishman, and although Jackson was a naturalized Canadian and had great respect for the British, he couldn't resist taking a few cracks at their policies. The words flew back and forth, the table jumped as points were banged home, and the Englishman's face became as red as the cowman's bandana.

"Gad, man, the British Empire is the greatest country in the world! Don't you know that the sun never sets on it?" he would shout. And Jackson would retort: "Of course it doesn't. The Lord knew what He was doing when He arranged that. He couldn't trust you people in the dark."

Sometimes the sessions would end up in shooting contest, as bullet holes in the smoke darkened logs testify. Happy Jack was proud of his ability with a gun, and more than one greenhorn has had to dance tothe accompaniment of his revolver shots. "I didn't like the way that fella handled the coffe pot, so I shot it out of his hand. I guess he won't be coming back," he said after one such night.

A story is told of Happy Jack and his cowboys coming off the early morning train at Brooks before the town was a town, and when the

only sleeping place was the attic of the one store, They clumped up to Kruger's Store and threw gravel at the upstairs window to awaken the owner. He was a strick teatotaler, and when he saw his would-be guests, refused to open the door. "You have been drinking, Mr. Jackson, and I have my wife to consider." But Happy Jack finally convinced him to come down and talk it over. "Aw let us in, Kruger," said Jackson, "We'll consider your wife. We won't even offer her a drink."

Happy Jack used to hold his annual branding days on Sunday when the whole countryside would turn out and give him a hand with the job. Sometimes as many as two hundred people would gather at his place, and after the branding, would stage a rodeo, stuff themselves with food at the picnic grounds near the river, and then dance all night on the ferry close by. The ferry was dismantled several years ago, but that part of the river is still known as the Happy Jack Ferry.

Because of his wide experience and retentive memory, Happy Jack knew most of the brands in the country, and at one time was considered the best brand reader in the continent. This was a real distinction in days when stock might roam for hundred of miles and there were no brand gazettes in which to identify them as there are today.

His nickname was a misnomer, for Happy Jack was anything but a jolly man. Few knew that his real name was Hansel Gordon Jackson, and he seemed as satisfied as any to let the H stand for "Happy". He rarely laughed aloud, but a twinkle in his eye and a quirk in his cheek revealed his enjoyment of a witty remark.

The saddle made especially for the big rancher, with his cow brand

on one side and his horse brand on the other side, wasn't used much after ago took the spring from his bones. He took his place in the old rangeman's section of the Calgary Stampede in 1930, but there was too much noise and confusion to meet with his complete approval, and he was glad to get back to the quiet of his ranch. He went back again though the year they paid special tribute to rancher Pat Burns, but after that he didn't stir from the Mexico neighborhood. Neighbors brought his mail and supplies, and took turns visiting him to see that he had everything he needed.

He had always said, "When I go west plant me in the cemetery at Brooks. And I don't want a lot of weeping over me."